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GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF

It is often the case that continentally oriented discussions of ethics are as difficult to read as they are abstracted from the realities of human existence. Judith Butler's recent contribution to moral philosophy, *Giving An Account of Oneself*, is a striking counter-example to this trend. Butler's prose is remarkably clear and her arguments are lucid. Although the reader will be rewarded by repeated readings of this book, the subtlety of Butler's presentation is so seamlessly constructed that it is not an obstacle that must be carefully navigated, but rather a current along which the reader is effortlessly swept. Irrespective of one's agreement or disagreement with Butler's thesis, this book is indispensable reading for anyone working at the intersection of postmodern ethics, contemporary political philosophy, and identity theory.

The question to which this book articulates an answer is asked by Butler herself: "Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?" (19) Bringing together such disparate voices as Foucault, Adorno, Levinas, and Laplanche, Butler argues convincingly that the failure of the subject to be able to give a coherent and final account of herself does not mean that ethical responsibility has evaporated in a postmodern context. Instead, Butler contends that by rethinking the self as always already interrupted by the other and as always embedded within prior social structures, we are actually able to reconceive the conditions upon which responsibility is possible and moral life is required. Central to her overall argument are two interrelated theses. First, the very demand that I give an account of myself to another, in order to justify my actions and my very way of being, exposes the constitutive structure of "address" that underlies all account-giving. That is, "I" give an account to "you" and "you" call me to be "me" in the very requirement of offering accounts in the first place. In a slight alteration from Husserl's conception of consciousness, we might say that for Butler, speaking is always a *speaking-to*. Second, language is not some tool that is simply

constructed at our will and then subsequently used and deployed. Rather, language is always implicated and invested from the outset in our engagements with others. As Butler writes, "the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making" (21). Because of these two realities, i.e., the relationality implied in address and the foreignness of language itself, the self is fundamentally "opaque to itself."

Counter to the predominant tradition in ethical theory – which claims that it is on the basis of a self-sufficient and free subject that we are able to assign agency, expect responsibility, and exact punishment for moral failure – Butler argues that "what we often consider to be ethical 'failure' may well have an ethical valence and importance that has not been rightly adjudicated by those who too quickly equate poststructuralism with moral nihilism" (21). If Butler is right, then the basis for morality is not self-identity, but the exposure to others; not self-recursion, but constitutive incompleteness; not a final subjective narrative, but the continual desire and attempt to not close down the task of narrative itself.

Butler spends the vast majority of the book working through the intricacies of how other thinkers have articulated a conception of the opaque self. The list of people with whom Butler engages is extensive, but on the whole she sees a division between those who locate the source of opacity in the social structures in which we are always entangled, and those who locate this source in the relation to others as constitutive of selfhood. With respect to the former group, Butler primarily draws upon Foucault and Adorno, and with respect to the latter group, she depends upon the work of Levinas and Laplanche. What unites all four is the recognition of sociality at the heart of subjectivity. There is no "I" who is originally formed and then enters the social world, but rather "I" have always already become a self because of the responses of and to others that have conditioned and instantiated my self-identity. "The first-person perspective assumed by the ethical question," Butler suggests in agreement with Foucault, is "disoriented by this fundamental dependency of the ethical sphere on the social" (25).

However, this sociality, as Butler demonstrates drawing upon the work of Adriana Cavarero, need neither be primarily conceived according to "the model of reciprocal recognition" (Hegel) nor the "view of life [that is] essentially bound up with destruction and suffering" (Nietzsche) (31-32). Rather, selfhood is possible only as a *dispossession* from oneself in relation to the other. I am not my own and this fact is what lies behind the call to give an account of myself in the first place. "It is only in dispossession that I can and do give any account of myself," Butler writes (37). Crucially, this constitutive sociality is not a problem *for* ethics, but the very wellspring from which problems can be viewed *as* ethical. As Butler asks in

order to then answer in the affirmative, "is the relationality that conditions and blinds this 'self' not, precisely, an indispensable resource for ethics?" (40)

Opacity as an ethical resource? Seeming ethical failure as the very strength of the ethical relationship? Butler suggests that because there is no possibility of a complete account of oneself, we begin to see the way in which a "new sense of ethics" can emerge from the "willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgement itself" (42). *Humility* would be the cornerstone of this new sense of ethics and constant *critique* would be the walls that are built upon it. The project of recognition would become a continual ethico-political task and one that we constantly have to renegotiate and repeat. Butler's point here is remarkably profound in a world in which technology has made other people from around the world "present" in a seemingly immediate way. This immediacy, Butler reminds us, is always itself mediated by the social norms and linguistic frameworks in which we "see" the other person (29-30). Butler is not too far from Walter Lippmann's point that we do not first see and then define, but instead "we define first and then see."[1] Prior definition is inescapable, but constantly revisable. Butler's claim is that the attempt to critique our institutions and our preconceptions ought not be conducted with the arrogance of assuming that we could actually "see" the other as she is. Instead, Butler argues, we ought to begin with the humbling realization that recognition itself presupposes structures that cover over the singularity of the other we are trying to "see."

Going beyond Adorno and Foucault, Butler draws on Levinas's notion of "preontological" relationality and Laplanche's psychoanalytic description of childhood development in order to support the way in which "the 'I' cannot give a final or adequate account of itself because it cannot return to the scene of address by which it is inaugurated" (67). Although in different ways, Levinas and Laplanche both describe the way in which the "I" emerges from the "primary experience of *having been given over from the start*" (77). The conclusion that Butler draws from her engagement with all four of these thinkers is that "the very meaning of responsibility must be rethought on the basis of this [self] limitation; it cannot be tied to the conceit of a self fully transparent to itself" (83). Further, she continues on to say that "my very formation implicates the other in me . . . my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others" (84). Butler thus proposes that humility is an expression of self-opacity, recognition is a task because of the other's opacity, and responsibility is the reality of the relation between the two.

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[1] See Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), especially Chapter six, "Stereotypes."

In an unacknowledged agreement with Kierkegaard, Butler ultimately concludes that "we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to becomes undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human" (136). This subjective undoing is "a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure," she admits, but it is also "a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession" (136). In response to those who would suggest that postmodernity necessarily implies a vicious relativism or even a nihilistic perspective, Butler illuminates the irony that subtends all attempts at complete self-description and, thus, opens new paths for ethical inquiry which, ideally, will point us toward a more just political reality.

Having summarized what I take to be Butler's position and outlined the main trajectories of her thought as they develop throughout the book, I now want to offer a few questions that are left unaddressed. I should note that these questions are not meant to be refutations, but simply points that I find to require further elaboration and/or clarification.

Remaining Questions

1) What is the relationship between the various sources of Butler's thinking? Are they all required in order to construct a complete theory? That is, is Laplanche's notion of childhood development meant to *supplement* Levinas's conception of an an-archic relation to alterity? And, subsequently, are Foucault's and Adorno's descriptions of the social structures and "regimes of truth" that inescapably shape and are shaped by the subject themselves *supplements* to the unified theory she draws from Laplanche and Levinas? In other words, Butler never really details the way in which she finds these thinkers to relate to each other. This is not necessarily detrimental to her argument, but it does make her argument a bit more difficult to follow than it might otherwise be since it is deeply dependent upon the interpretations she offers of these other philosophers. A bit more constructive work at the end of the book would go a long way towards making it clear where Butler's position is a distinct synthesis of, or perhaps alternative to, the positions already advocated by these other thinkers.

2) Towards the end of the book, Butler claims that there is a priority of rhetoric to ethics (134). This move appears to be required in order for her articulation of the way in which our "mode of address" always "conditions and structures the way in

which moral questions arise" (134). But, while granting the direction of her thought, must these notions be separate in the way she suggests? Doesn't Levinas already describe the ethical relation as one of vocative approach and linguistic address? Perhaps it is better to just say that the two are never separable because they are mutually invested in each other? Given that this claim is made in the context of a discussion of Foucault, it may be the case that her distinction between the two and claims of priority for the one over the other are a product of the particular way in which she diverges from Foucault. But, if this is so, it just lends credence to my suggestion above that a clearer articulation of her position as distinct from those she appropriates is required.

3) Although this book is not intended to be a practical guide for ethical and political life, it is a bit difficult to see exactly how Butler takes her position to be able to answer Adorno's challenge that an ethical norm is violent if it "fails to offer a way to life or that turns out, within existing social conditions, to be impossible to appropriate" (5-6). I do not mean to suggest that Butler should provide a detailed *prescriptive* ethical code; for surely such prescriptivity is what Butler challenges as the best way to understand normativity itself. However, some suggestion for how to translate the acknowledgement of subjective opacity into a different way of inhabiting the political sphere would be helpful for addressing the possible charge of speculative abstraction (of which I do not believe she is guilty).

4) Further, it seems that the problem with the previous question develops out of a failure on Butler's part to really differentiate between what Levinas calls the *ethical* and the *political*. At times it seems as if Butler does affirm a distinction between the two: "we might say that the ethical demand gives rise to the political account" (124). Yet, at other times Butler appears to simply claim that everything at bottom is really political – e.g., in her deflationary reading of Levinas's "Other" (90) and her willingness to go along with Foucault's suggestion that we can only critique a specific regime of truth from within other regimes (22ff). Certainly it is right to say that we cannot step out of our social setting in order to understand our ethical obligation, but even if ethics only signifies from *within* the political, this does not mean that ethics and politics are thereby identical/reducible to each other.

We might say that ethics is the fact that, as John Caputo says, "obligation happens,"[2] and that, as Levinas claims, politics is the space in which this happening confronts me as a task of adjudication, appropriation, and interpretation. Ethics may always be politically situated and politics always contested by ethics, but saying that they are in a constant tension is a different

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[2] John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 247-48.

claim than saying that ethics is simply politics. Indeed, it would seem that some sort of distinction is required to make sense of Butler's privileging of critique as the ethical demand on political life. Because I am convinced by Butler's argument on this front, I am inclined to believe that Butler's theory can accommodate the distinction between ethics and politics without thereby requiring their separation, but it is difficult to see exactly how from the text itself.

Final Assessment

Despite these lingering questions, *Giving An Account of Oneself* is a noteworthy book that significantly contributes to the contemporary literature in moral and political philosophy. Her analyses of Adorno, Foucault, Levinas, and Laplanche are simultaneously accessible to those without much background in their thought and stimulating enough to engage and challenge the most accomplished scholar. The way she reads other texts is an example of how to approach the other with open arms and a critical eye. If the success of a book is the conversation that it inaugurates, then this book should prove to be overwhelmingly successful. Butler's "account" of how we ought to reconceive ethics, responsibility, and identity, is not meant to be the final word on the matter, but an event that calls for our response and, in doing so, performs the very engagement that she advocates.

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